

# Guidelines for Conjunctivitis Outbreaks in Congregate Settings (Hospitals, Long-Term Care Facility, Prisons, Dormitories, Shelters, Etc.)



## Define the Outbreak

**Outbreak Definition:** An increase in the number of cases of conjunctivitis over and above the expected number of cases. After determining the usual/expected rates of conjunctivitis, you can determine the threshold for outbreak detection.

**Incubation Period:** Bacterial conjunctivitis: 24-48 hours  
Viral conjunctivitis: 5-12 days

**Communicability:** Bacterial conjunctivitis: Contagious period ends when the course of antibiotics is started or when the symptoms are no longer present.  
Viral conjunctivitis: Contagious period continues while signs or symptoms are present (antibiotics do not reduce spread).

**How it spreads:** Both bacterial and viral conjunctivitis are most often spread through hand-to-eye contact with contaminated hands/objects. Other ways it can spread include contact with fecal matter, eye discharge, large respiratory tract droplets, infectious tears, or contact of eye with contaminated objects.

*For more information on Bacterial/Viral Conjunctivitis and their common causes visit: [Clinical Overview of Pink Eye \(Conjunctivitis\)](#)*

## When you have an outbreak:

1. Report the outbreak immediately to your local health department.
2. Begin line listing of ill persons, complete for the duration of the outbreak until you have no new cases for two incubation periods.
3. Conduct a thorough search for additional cases.
4. Institute mass education for prevention to residents and staff and provide information to visitors.
5. Individuals with conjunctivitis generally do not need excluded from school/daycare settings unless staff members determine they cannot care for the child without compromising care for other individuals, the child meets other exclusion criteria, or it is recommended by their healthcare professional.

## To help control the spread of infection:

1. Increase cleaning, especially high touch surfaces.
2. Wash your hands often with soap and water, and help young children do the same.
3. Wash your hands after contact with an infected person or any items they use.
4. Avoid touching or rubbing your eyes.
5. Avoid sharing personal items, such as makeup, eye drops, towels, bedding, contact lenses and containers, and eyeglasses.
6. Do not use the same eye products for your infected and non-infected eyes.
7. Stop wearing contact lenses until your eye doctor says it's okay.
8. Clean, store, and replace your contact lenses as instructed by your eye doctor.
9. Do not use swimming pools for the duration of symptoms.

**REMEMBER: Outbreaks are immediately reportable to your local health department.**